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Horst Höhne
(ed.)

Romantic Discourses

*Papers delivered at the Symposium
on the Bicentenary of the Birth
of Percy Bysshe Shelley,
Ahrenshoop, October 2-5, 1992*



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**Shelley's "Mont Blanc": The Aesthetic "Aufhebung"¹ of
a Philosophical Antinomy**

Shelley's *Mont Blanc* is indisputably one of the key poems of his overall oeuvre. No matter what line of interpretation they prefer, all critics are agreed that it holds a strategic position for the characterization of Shelley's poetological, ideological and philosophical profile in his middle years, and as the exact nature of this middle phase is itself highly controversial, *Mont Blanc* can be seen as a text whose interpretation vitally affects the assessment of Shelley's entire career.

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that *Mont Blanc*, "the most difficult of Shelley's shorter poems", "has received more diverse interpretations than any other".² The stakes are high. There is, it is true, a certain consensus that *Mont Blanc*, just like Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey", is a highly complex *philosophical* poem, which takes a specific topography only as a starting point for an extended discussion of the relationships between mind and world, consciousness and matter, subject and object - a philosophical deliberation poetically dramatized. But it is far from being settled what the actual outcome of Shelley's exertions is. For a while, the Platonists held *Mont Blanc*, declaring it proved Shelley to be a genuine idealist. These forces of yesteryear have long withdrawn into distant valleys and their rearguard fighting hardly impinges upon the current critical debate any more. Others have read *Mont Blanc* in a materialist vein, arguing that it shows a godless universe governed by Necessity. Others again have held that Shelley evidently couldn't quite make up his mind and that the poem is therefore full of tension and downright contradictions. Today the ruling orthodoxy undoubtedly is that Shelley was a sceptic, although that designation seems to have become an ultra-liberal umbrella term, sheltering all sorts of philosophical positions, from the idealist scepticism of Berkeley to the empiricist scepticism of Hume, from the special brand

¹ The term is used in its threefold Hegelian sense of a) to raise, b) to preserve, c) to cancel.

² Kenneth Neill Cameron, *Shelley: The Golden Years*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1974, 244.

of William Drummond to the contention that Shelley was so sceptical that he had hardly any convictions of his own, but spent his life - a deconstructionist *avant la lettre* - exploding those of others.

It may seem presumptuous to claim that after all this something new - and possibly something new and of importance - can be said about *Mont Blanc*. But I should nevertheless like to suggest a new reading, one that re-defines the philosophical core of the poem by differentiating between its implied ontology and its epistemology and then proceeds to show how the two are poetically linked.

Mont Blanc was written in late July, 1816, when Shelley, Mary Godwin and Claire Clairmont visited the valley of Chamonix. It was the same trip on which Shelley described himself as "Democrat, Philanthropist, and Atheist", "destination l'enfer" in possibly three hotel registers or visitors' books. As we know from his diary letters to Peacock, Shelley was overwhelmed by the alpine scenery and especially by the sight of the Mont Blanc massif. His poem takes its origin from this overpowering experience and is at the same time an attempt to create in language the equivalent of its occasion, as Shelley himself explained in his preface to the first edition of *Mont Blanc* in 1817:

It was composed under the immediate impression of the deep and powerful feelings excited by the objects which it attempts to describe; and, as an indisciplined overflowing of the soul, rests its claim to approbation on an attempt to imitate the untameable wildness and inaccessible solemnity from which those feelings sprang.³

The verbal echoes of Wordsworth's "Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*" are quite distinct, but so are the differences: Whereas Wordsworth defines poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" and adds significantly, "it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity", it seems that Shelley intended a direct, as it were, iconic presentation of those "powerful feelings", without the mitigating filter of a "recollection in tranquillity". And this might explain why *Mont Blanc* begins with such enormous power and thrust, with a momentum that carries its periods over the line endings like a mountain stream in *schuss*:

³ Quoted from M.H. Abrams et al. (eds.), *The Norton Anthology of English Literature, Fifth Edition*, 2 vols., New York/London: Norton, 1986, vol. 2, 685.

1 The everlasting universe of things
 Flows through the mind, and rolls its rapid waves,
 Now dark - now glittering - now reflecting gloom -
 Now lending splendour, where from secret springs
 The source of human thought its tribute brings
 Of waters, - with a sound but half its own.
 Such as a feeble brook will oft assume
 In the wild woods, among the mountains lone,
 Where waterfalls around it leap forever,
 Where woods and winds contend, and a vast river
 11 over its rocks ceaselessly bursts and raves.⁴

As William Keach has brilliantly analyzed *Mont Blanc*'s highly complex rhyme scheme and metrics⁵, I can confine myself to remarking that in this first stanza - which is surprisingly abstract after the topographical title - Shelley makes a clear, unequivocal philosophical statement on the relation of mind and the world of objects: The human mind is flown through by the never-ceasing stream of the world of objects and delivers but a moderate contribution of its own, a contribution whose share is often overestimated, as Shelley makes clear by a simple analogy in lines 7ff.: "the universe of things" and "human thoughts" stand in the same relation to each other as "vast river" and "feeble brook" do. This has the clarity of a mathematical equation:

$$\begin{array}{ccc} \text{universe of things} & & \text{vast river} \\ \text{-----} & = & \text{-----} \\ \text{human thought} & & \text{feeble brook} \end{array}$$

In the second stanza, Shelley underlines this view of things by adding another, extended analogy: "thus thou" signals unmistakably that he regards the deep ravine of the river Arve as yet another concrete illustration of the relationship defined in stanza 1. The ravine - all passive - is run through by a river that is the symbol of an active power ("Power in likeness of the Arve comes down" [16]). The ravine is an entirely passive receptacle, or rather duct,

⁴ All Shelley texts are quoted from *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, eds. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers, New York/London: Norton, 1977.

⁵ Cf. William Keach, *Shelley's Style*, New York/London: Methuen, 1984.

even what it gives back is only the echo of a perpetual dynamics that has its source elsewhere:

30 Thy caverns echoing to the Arve's commotion,
 A loud, lone sound no other sound can tame;
 Thou art pervaded with that ceaseless motion,
 Thou art the path of that unresting sound -
34 Dizzy Ravine!

For those who still cannot see how the roles are distributed, where Shelley puts activity and where passivity, the following lines should be an eye-opener, because he describes the relationship of subject and object as a continuously dialectical one, but one in which the object pole is clearly dominant:

34 and when I gaze on thee
 I seem as in a trance sublime and strange
 To muse on my own separate phantasy,
 My own, my human mind, which passively
 Now renders and receives fast influencings,
 Holding an unremitting interchange
40 With the clear universe of things around; (34-40)

If one compares this to the opposite passage in Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey", which also renders the relation between mind and world as a dialectical one, the difference is immediately evident: "I am still", we read in Wordsworth's poem,

103 A lover of the meadows and the woods,
 And mountains; and of all that we behold
 From this green earth; of all the mighty world
 Of eye, and ear, - both what they half create,
107 And what perceive;⁶

In Wordsworth, consciousness *projects* the world and is *actively* involved in the constitution of reality, whereas here in *Mont Blanc* the "unremitting interchange" has an obvious tilt towards the object pole. The backflow which consciousness returns is only

⁶ Also quoted from the *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, vol. 2.

seemingly active, even its supposed giving is, strictly speaking, anything but - note: "which *passively* / Now renders and receives". Consciousness is embedded in a total continuity, which can hardly be called dialectical any more because it doesn't allow autonomy. Consciousness is absorbed in this continuity, in which subject and object are fused *on the terms of the latter*. This conception will be maintained till the end of *Mont Blanc*. Even the following passage - indeed one of the most difficult and controversial ones of the poem - which is full of ambiguous grammatical references and equivocal metaphors and deals with the question how, under these circumstances, something like creativity can take place at all, does not significantly modify Shelley's model.

Instead, he now turns in stanzas 3 and 4 to the origin of that enormous power, the unmoved mover or *primum mobile* behind the perpetual cycle of existence and decay (see lines 84-95), in his imagery: Mont Blanc. But majestic as its summit rises ("Still, snowy, and serene"), the scenery below is one of utter devastation and destruction. Superhuman forces have here formed a landscape that is harsh, hostile and repulsive:

62 Its subject mountains their unearthly forms
 Pile around it, ice and rock; broad vales between
 Of frozen floods, unfathomable deeps,
 Blue as the overhanging heaven, that spread
 And wind among the accumulated steepes;
 A desert peopled by the storms alone,
 Save when the eagle brings some hunter's bone,
 And the wolf tracts her there - how hideously
 Its shapes are heaped around! rude, bare, and high,
 Ghastly, and scarred, and riven. - Is this the scene
 Where the old Earthquake-daemon taught her young
 Ruin? Were these their toys? or did a sea
 74 Of fire, envelope once this silent snow?

This is the likeness of a nature that in its very greatness and material power is absolutely indifferent to humanity, heedless of its existence. Nature - and therein lies its terror - stands for the inconceivable, the Other, the non-human that breaks into man's life:

100

The glaciers creep

Like snakes that watch their prey, from their far fountains,
 Slow rolling on; there, many a precipice,
 Frost and the Sun in scorn of mortal power
 Have piled: dome, pyramid, and pinnacle,
 A city of death, distinct with many a tower
 And wall impregnable of beaming ice.
 Yet not a city, but a flood of ruin
 Is there, that from the boundaries of the sky
 Rolls its perpetual stream; vast pines are strewn
 Its destined path, or in the mangled soil
 Branchless and shattered stand: the rocks, drawn down
 From yon remotest waste, have overthrown
 The limits of the dead and living world,
 Never to be reclaimed. The dwelling-place
 Of insects, beasts, and birds, becomes its spoil;
 Their food and their retreat for ever gone,
 So much of life and joy is lost. The race
 Of man, flies far in dread; his work and dwelling
 Vanish, like smoke before the tempest's stream,
 And their place is not known.

120

Shelley presents a view of nature, of creation, in which man holds no privileged status but is brutally and helplessly exposed to the rage of its elements. Overawed, he recognizes its superior strength, thrown as he is into a world that was not built for him but to which he has to accommodate. That the majestic river can work beneficently *in distant countries* (124) only supports the idea that this power is to be conceived of as essentially *indifferent*, that is, it does not exist with regard to humanity, it is not concerned with it. *This* is the lesson of the sublime and awful scene:

96

Power dwells apart in its tranquillity
 Remote, serene, and inaccessible:
 And *this*, the naked countenance of earth,
 On which I gaze, even these primeval mountains
 Teach the adverting mind.

100

This universe cannot be conceived of as being anthropocentric, and the only consolation it holds is an indirect one: Compared to the dimensions and time periods of geology and the cosmos, the injustices and cruelties of political tyranny and despotism vanish like nothing. A recurrent topos in Shelley's political thinking - well known from *Queen Mab*, "Ozymandias"

and *Prometheus Unbound*, to say nothing of his prose writings - is thus introduced at the end of stanza 3: The very proportions of nature expose social orders and formations as but passing, inessential deviations - paradoxically, it is through its non-human dimensions that material nature opens up the revolutionary perspective that we are still in the pre-history of mankind - history proper has not yet begun:

76 The wilderness has a mysterious tongue
 Which teaches awful doubt, or faith so mild,
 So solemn, so serene, that man may be
 But for such faith with nature reconciled;
 Thou hast a voice, great Mountain, to repeal
 Large codes of fraud and woe; not understood
 83 By all, but which the wise, and great, and good
 Interpret, or make felt, or deeply feel.

When I said above that Shelley's conception or model of the relation between mind and the world of things would be maintained till the end of the poem, that was, I confess, a deliberately ambiguous phrasing. For although the determination of human thought by outside forces is emphasized yet again in lines 139-141 -

139 The secret strength of things
 Which governs thought, and to the infinite dome
 141 Of heaven is as a law, inhabits thee! - ,

there is, in the last three lines of *Mont Blanc*, a totally unexpected, incredible and brilliant reversal:

142 And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea,
 If to the human mind's imaginings
 144 Silence and solitude were vacancy?

That is the decisive point: The human mind alone invests the world with meaning and significance. Mind may be a part of nature, subject to its laws - but nature is only meaningful, it is Nature writ large, because there is a consciousness for which even silence and solitude are not vacancy, not emptiness and nothing. Human consciousness does not *create*

the flow of the "everlasting universe of things" - quite the contrary, it is based upon it -, but it structures it and invests it with meaning and significance. It is in the human mind that the world becomes conscious of itself. And if you are looking for an example of this essentially human ability to "see things as", to find meaning even in dead matter and understand *Stille* as *Schweigen* - well, Shelley's *Mont Blanc* is a wonderful specimen: it illustrates its own thesis, it practices what it preaches.

It remains to discuss whether Shelley understood this great continuum, in which subject and object are fused, in which the former is conditioned by the latter, but the latter named and interpreted by the former, in an idealist sense as a spiritual one or in a more empirical sense as a material one - or whether he transcended this alternative in *Mont Blanc*. And it is, I should like to suggest, the notion of *the sublime* that helps to elucidate Shelley's highly original position in this question, because it is, as I should like to show, in the concept and in the experience of the sublime that Shelley finds a paradigmatic and genuinely aesthetic solution for a philosophical antinomy that had haunted him for quite a while.

The concept of the sublime which derives from the rhetorical treatise *Peri Hypsous* of Pseudo-Longinus of the first century after Christ, is - it is trivial to observe - of an immense importance to eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century discussions of art and literature in Britain. The first translation of *Peri Hypsous* into English dates back to 1652, but it was only the translation of Boileau's somewhat idiosyncratic rendering of the tract (1674) that spread its influence decisively. Now the interesting thing about the eighteenth-century sublime in Britain is that the originally *rhetorical* term - it designates a *textual* quality that points to the greatness of the soul of its author - is first stretched in the opposite direction - it comes, after Boileau, to mean the treatment of a theme and *its effect* on the *reader*, the feeling it evokes - and then, finally, applied to a set of feelings which are aroused by nothing literary at all, viz. by the grandeur and majesty of *nature* as it is manifested in the sea, the sky or high mountains. This shift in meaning - for which the names of Thomas Burnet, John Dennis, Joseph Addison (all of whom did know the thing but did not use the term for it) and of Edmund Burke may stand -is, curiously enough, a British and German phenomenon, the French retain the rhetorical meaning, so that Laurence Sterne could write in his *Sentimental Journey* in 1768:

I confess I do hate all cold conceptions, as I do the puny ideas which engender them; and am generally so struck with the great works of nature, that for my own part, if I could help it, I never would make a comparison less than a mountain at least. All that can be said against the French sublime in this instance of it, is this - that the grandeur is *more* in the *word*; and *less* in the *thing*.⁷

This shift towards the natural sublime and the concomitant emphasis on the subject's reaction to nature's objects culminates towards the end of the century in Immanuel Kant's analysis of the sublime in his third critique, *The Critique of Judgement* (1790).

Now Shelley's *Mont Blanc* gives us in an almost classical manner an image of the natural sublime as both quality of an object and subjective experience at the same time. The alpine landscape, the feeling of being overpowered and a strange feeling of fusion or unity with the surroundings are commonplaces of the discourse on the sublime. The second - the feeling of being overpowered - can help to answer the question of Shelley's *ontology*, the third - feeling of union or fusion - will clarify Shelley's *epistemology*.

First, in how far does Shelley's depiction of the overpowering experience of Mont Blanc and its glaciers give us a clue as to whether he saw "the great continuum" as a material or spiritual one? It is a topos of the discourse of the sublime in the eighteenth century to regard the overpowering experience of nature's immensity as a proof of the existence of God and the fundamentally spiritual nature of reality. Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Hymn before Sunrise, in the Vale of Chamouni", published in the *Morning Post* and *Poetical Register* in 1802 and reprinted in *The Friend* in 1809, is a textbook example of this: The natural landscape proves God, he is the author behind the work. "Who *would* be," thus Coleridge on the message of his poem, "who *would* be, who *could* be an Atheist in this valley of wonders!"⁸ Well, he obviously could not foresee the possibility of a P.B. Shelley. For especially when seen in contrast with "Hymn before Sunrise", it is evident how demonstratively *Mont Blanc* is written *against* a firmly established literary, philosophical and religious tradition, how determinedly it denies - confronting the same scenery ! - any transcendental

⁷ Laurence Sterne, *A Sentimental Journey & Journal to Eliza*, New York: Signet, 1964, 58.

⁸ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Poetical Works*, ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge, Oxford: OUP, 1973, 377.

transfiguration of the horror. Whereas Coleridge's "Hymn" - partly plagiarized from Friederike Bruns "Chamounix beym Sonnenaufgange" (May 1 79 1), not even written in the vale of Chamounix and disparagingly qualified by William Wordsworth as "a specimen of the mock sublime"⁹ - whereas this hymn praises God, *Mont Blanc* is a document of the overpowering experience of a material force threatening bodily annihilation. Just as the human mind is confronted with something that surpasses its capacities ("the very spirit fails"), so man as a physical being is threatened to be annihilated by "Nature as Might" (Kant) and he realizes his utter impotence in view of these material forces when he sees that "to offer some resistance to [them] [...] would be quite futile".¹⁰ This second aspect of the sublime - called the dynamically sublime by Kant in contrast to the mathematically sublime - seems to me to be foregrounded to such a degree in stanzas 3 and 4 of *Mont Blanc* that the impression it gives is one of unalloyed *materiality*. Here, Shelley's sublime is, in an admittedly ambiguous passage in Keats, "a material sublime".¹¹ In its evocation of terror in view of an indifferent, godless universe, to which man as a physical being is only peripheral and accidental, *Mont Blanc* - especially when seen against the backdrop of the tradition it breaks - is a manifestation of an ontological and matter-of-fact materialism.

But things look different in regard to epistemology, and it is, as I indicated, the concept and the experience of the sublime that allows Shelley to bridge the apparent philosophical hiatus. The third commonplace of the sublime mentioned above is the peculiar experience of unity, the fusion of subject and object. For the Romantics, the sublime is a *relational* phenomenon, that is, it is neither to be located exclusively as a quality inherent in the object nor exclusively as a psychological effect in the beholder. William Wordsworth makes this very explicit in his fragment "The Sublime and the Beautiful" (1810/11), a text which was probably intended to form part of what was to become *A Guide Through the District of the*

⁹ See Stuart Curran, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism*, New York: OUP, 1986, 60.

¹⁰ Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, transl. by James Creed Meredith, Oxford: Clarendon, 1992, 110.

¹¹ The poem is "To J.H. Reynolds, Esq.". For a discussion see Louise Smith, "The Material Sublime: Keats and *Isabella*", *Keats: The Narrative Poems - A Casebook*, ed. John Spencer Hill, London: Macmillan, 1983, 105-118.

Lakes (1835), because it treats, again, of the experience of the sublime in a mountainous region. Wordsworth says

[that] [t]o talk of an object as being sublime or beautiful in itself, without reference to some subject by whom that sublimity or beauty is perceived, is absurd; [...]. The true province of the philosopher is not to grope about in the external world and, when he has perceived or detected in an object such or such a quality or power, to set himself to the task of persuading the world that such is a sublime or beautiful object, but to look into his own mind and determine the law by which he is affected.¹²

But this affection of the mind results from "the notion or image of intense unity, with which the Soul is occupied or possessed".¹³ Again it was Kant who explained much better than Wordsworth could how a feeling of failure (the failure to grasp that which is "great beyond all comparison") is finally transformed in the two-phase experience of the mathematically sublime to its very opposite, a feeling of sublime grandeur. But the Kant-Shelley-connection will be pursued in a larger study. Here, it must suffice to say that in this state, subject and object are fused, melt into each other in such a way that it makes little sense to differentiate between external object and internal experience, because both coincide and the real experience of the sublime constitutes the sublime.

But this makes the experience of the sublime paradigmatic of an idealist epistemology, because it shows - albeit through a borderline experience - that all we perceive and know is only given as a presence in our consciousness, as a state of our own mind.

Was that Shelley's position at the time? Without any doubt. The brilliant closing lines of *Mont Blanc* - which can be compared with phase 2 of Kant's sublime - say nothing but that it is human consciousness that projects the world according to its categories, actively structures the flow of sense impressions, and, most important of all, transcends the world

¹² William Wordsworth, *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, eds. W.J.B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, 3 vols., Oxford: Clarendon, 1974, vol. 2, 357.

¹³ Wordsworth, *Prose*, 355.

thus experienced by giving it human significance.¹⁴ Already the "witch of Poesy" passage, here only mentioned in passing, in which the finding of the right image for the ravine of the Arve is greeted with an emphatic "Thou art there!", can be understood as an instance of philosophical idealism.

But there is also external evidence, in Shelley's essay *On Life* (today dated December 1819), which has to be adduced because it has often been cited to present *Mont Blanc* (with which it is often coupled) and Shelley as being idealist through and through. It is true that in *On Life* Shelley writes "nothing exists but as it is perceived" and he distances himself from his youthful materialism, "This materialism is a seducing system to young and superficial minds. It allows its disciples to talk, and dispenses them from thinking."¹⁵ When he continues, "Each is at once the centre and the circumference, the point to which all things are referred, and the line in which all things are contained", this reads like a prose paraphrase of *Mont Blanc*'s last three lines. In his epistemological idealism he cancels, as was to be expected, the demarcation line between object and idea when he reiterates, "Nothing exists but as it is perceived", and then continues, "The difference is merely nominal between those two classes of thought, which are vulgarly distinguished by the names of ideas and of external objects."¹⁶ And in an ultimate intensification he seems for a moment to become an *absolute* idealist, when he says:

¹⁴ In the larger study mentioned above - Christoph Bode, *"And what were thou...": Essay über Shelley und das Erhabene*, Essen: Blaue Eule, 1992 - it will be shown that Shelley's "the human mind's imaginings" and Kant's "unbestimmte Vernunftideen" are functionally equivalent and that their conceptions of the sublime are much closer than has hitherto been supposed.

¹⁵ *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, 476.

¹⁶ *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, 477.

Pursuing the same thread of reasoning, the existence of distinct individual minds, similar to that which is employed in now questioning its own nature, is likewise found to be a delusion. The words *I, you, they*, are not signs of any actual difference subsisting between the assemblage of thoughts thus indicated, but are merely marks employed to denote the different modifications of the one mind. [...] I am but a portion of it.¹⁷

What a field day for those who would like to pocket Shelley as an unadulterated idealist! Is it possible to imagine a more definite statement of one's philosophical idealism? But doesn't that mean that my thesis of Shelley the ontological materialist is obsolete? Not at all. For *On Life* is not yet at an end, and just as Shelley puts an idealistic epistemology on top of his materialist ontology at the very end of *Mont Blanc*, he bases, at the end of *On Life*, his idealism on a full-grown materialism. Essay and poem are inverse twin texts:

[...] that the basis of all things cannot be, as the popular philosophy alleges, mind, is sufficiently evident. Mind, as far as we have any experience of its properties, and beyond this experience how vain is argument, cannot create, it can only perceive. It is said also to be the Cause? [*sic*] [...] [But] [i]t is infinitely improbable that the cause of mind, that is, of existence, is similar to mind.¹⁸

That is the last sentence of *On Life*. Or rather, it *was*, until Donald Reiman and Sharon Powers in their edition of the essay introduced the following which had formerly been taken to be a part of Shelley's *Speculations on Metaphysics* - it reads: "It is said that mind produces motion and it might as well have been said that motion produces mind." But this only underlines the message, because it reminds of d'Holbach's witty remark, aimed at Descartes, in the *Système de la Nature* (which Shelley knew) that rather than say there is something separate from matter which can think it would have been more consistent to conclude that matter can think. A cutting application of Ockham's razor. Mind is highly organized matter in motion - Shelley continued to believe this, as can be seen from another essay of his, *On a Future State*.

¹⁷ Shelley's *Poetry and Prose*, 477-8.

¹⁸ Shelley's *Poetry and Prose*, 478.

Shelley's universe is a *material* one, which does not exist for man but confronts him indifferently. This realization overwhelms him and would leave him helpless if it were not for the insight that such knowledge and such self-knowledge is possible *only in his mind*, this new quality of the universe, and that there alone the world exists as a meaningful one. In *Mont Blanc* - and this will go on for years - Shelley is an ontological materialist and an epistemological idealist at the same time.

Isn't that philosophically dubious? Maybe so. But Shelley was -whatever he thought about himself and in spite of his stupendous reading and never-waning interest - no systematical philosopher. As a poet, it was enough for him to have reconciled (or *aufgehoben*) the philosophical contradictions of his position in a genuinely aesthetic category: *the sublime*.

And that he really saw them reconciled is borne out by a simple, unassuming little word at the beginning of the third line from the end of *Mont Blanc*, a word whose placement is evidence of Shelley's incredible poetic genius, it is the word "and" - which here, quite unlike the expected "but", signals the poetic *Aufhebung* of a philosophical antinomy. It is, by the way, the same "and" that we find in the last sentence of *On Life*. Shelley's materialism and his idealism are reconciled, their opposition is transcended, in the aesthetic concept and in the experience of the sublime.